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FOREIGN SERVICE DESPATCH

FROM : AMEMBASSY GUATEMALA

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APR 16 1953

TO : THE DEPARTMENT OF STATE, WASHINGTON.

April 15, 1953

DATE

REF : Embassy Telegrams No. 392, March 30; No. 393, March 21, 1953

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SUBJECT: Aftermath of Baja Verapaz Uprising.

Although the Guatemalan Government had little difficulty in suppressing the insurgents who seized and held Salamá in Baja Verapaz and the nearby San Jerónimo airstrip for 17 hours on March 29, 1953 and although the authorities at first publicly minimized the incident's importance, the seemingly minor revolt took on international significance when the Foreign Minister, Dr. Raúl G. G. G., in notes dated April 4 to the other Central American countries said that the rebels were armed with foreign weapons and were expecting airborne aid from abroad and gave this as one reason for Guatemala's withdrawal from the Organization of Central American States (ODECA) (Embassy telegram No. 411 April 7, 1953). The Salamá affair was also mentioned in Dr. G. G.'s note of April 1 to the United Nations as an indication that Guatemala was threatened with external aggression. On the domestic front the Government showed its concern by arresting large numbers of persons suspected of implication in the movement, and the fatal shooting of four of the insurrection's field leaders "while attempting to escape" from the Salamá jail on March 31 was taken as an ominous warning to other would-be revolutionists.

The Foreign Minister's notes threw little additional light on the plans of the insurgents, which still remain obscure. In both cases he stated that the rebels expected aid from abroad and in his note to the other Central American Foreign Ministers he said that when the preliminary judicial investigation (sumario) had been completed, further details would be made known. It will be recalled that the insurgents marked the landing strip they controlled in a distinctive fashion, and this circumstance was thought to indicate that they expected reinforcements by air, perhaps from abroad. This deduction was partially substantiated by the statements of one of the captured rebels, Sr. Atilio FIGUEROA, who was reported by Colonel Rogelio GUZMÁN Wer, Chief of Police, to have said that he and his comrades had been "absolutely certain" that they would receive "all" kinds of aid by airplane coming from Mexico and Nicaragua. Sr. Figueroa was one of those shot on March 31 in the Salamá prison.

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While the question of possible foreign aid has not been clarified, the Government's investigation has revealed that a simultaneous uprising had apparently been planned in El Progreso, capital of the Department of the same name and a place of some strategic importance since it is on the railway between Guatemala City and Puerto Barrios, and is near the point where the Salamá highway meets the rail line. Colonel Cruz Wer informed a La Hora reporter on April 6 that the police had discovered a cache of 30 machine guns and a number of rifles in the vicinity and had arrested 18 persons. No explanation was given for the failure of the El Progreso plotters to act, but there is a widespread belief, so far unconfirmed, that uprisings had also been planned in other areas.

Indications are that the Salamá revolt was carried out by only a fraction of the anti-Government, anti-Communist movement and that other, probably more important groups not only did not participate but actually disapproved of the Salamá attempt. What effect the abortive uprising may have on their plans is not known but it is likely that the severe counter measures taken by the authorities and the Government's alertness against further subversive acts, sharpened by the events at Salamá, may have created additional difficulties for the other groups and forced them to postpone their intended moves.

Police action since March 30 has been clearly designed not only to capture participants in the uprising and those who planned it but also to intimidate persons, mostly anti-Communists, known to be disaffected with the Government and suspected of plotting against it. The press reported on April 6 that 99 individuals were in prison at Salamá, where all persons suspected of complicity are being concentrated for judicial investigation, and that four active leaders of the revolt, Sres. Jorge HAEUSSLER Ariza, Fabián BRIZAR, Otilio FIGUEROA and Eduardo MORALES y Morales had been killed in an attempt to escape from the prison on March 31. The frank manner in which the Chief of Police issued the latter announcement made it appear likely that it was designed to have a deterrent effect on other enemies of the Administration.

Also calculated to intimidate the opposition were the arrests during the Easter Holidays of Sres. Mario SALDOVAL Alarcón, Oscar CUBAN, Carlos VESCOVICH and Oscar COMDE, prominent members of the students' anti-Communist organization CEUA, and of Sr. Juan CORDOVA Cerna, a former Associate Justice of the Supreme Court who, after having aided the movements against President PRIMO and Acting President PONCE in 1944, broke with the revolutionary forces shortly after Dr. ARZULO assumed the Presidency and is now a leader of the anti-Communist movement. The four students were interrogated in Guatemala and then transported to Salamá for trial. Sr. Córdova Cerna was also to be

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sent to Salamá, but, according to a statement by Colonel Cruz to the press on April 7, he succeeded in escaping from his guards on the way and has not been recaptured. This statement was received with considerable skepticism and the belief was widespread that Sr. Córdova Cerna had either been summarily executed or had been so badly beaten that the police feared to produce him in court.

In their search for the intellectual leaders of the revolt the police also arrested three retired Army officers in Guatemala City: Colonel Guillermo FLORES Avendaño, Herlindo BOLONZANO and Alfredo GARCÍA, all men of advanced years who had been associated with the 1954 revolt. They are currently among those in the closed prison, together with such minor figures as the Chief of Police of Salamá, Sr. Juan Antonio ESTRADA and the local Mayor, Sr. Guillermo AGUIRRE, reportedly a member of the anti-Communist party USA.

Some of the persons sought by the Government had better luck: one of the able leaders of the revolt, Major (ret.) Manuel de J. Solís, made his way from Salamá to Guatemala City on foot with two companions, the former Captains Julio Sergio ESPINOSA and Florencio Abigail REJIA. Disguised as participants in a Holy Week procession they succeeded in slipping into the Mexican Embassy, were granted asylum and left Guatemala for Mexico on April 9 under safe conduct issued by the Foreign Office. Sr. Carlos CHAN, an anti-Communist leader who had put forward his candidacy for Congress in the January 1955 elections and subsequently withdrawn it in the interests of unity, took asylum in the Honduran Embassy and is understood to be planning a trip to the United States after his departure from Guatemala.

Meanwhile, the authorities took general precautions against possible subversive attempts: cars entering and leaving Guatemala City and other centers were searched and those found with unlicensed arms were taken to police headquarters for investigation. The Army and police were kept on a semi-alert status, and two or more guards were placed at the Chanceries and residences of the Chiefs of foreign diplomatic Missions to intercept persons seeking asylum. The feeling of tension produced by these moves was heightened by the announcement of Guatemala's withdrawal from ODECA and the move to the United Nations denouncing the existence of a foreign plot against its integrity, steps which indicated the existence of a certain nervousness on the part of Government officials.

Much of the Government's disquiet undoubtedly stems from the well-founded suspicion that there are still at large several groups which are plotting against it, but the events at Salamá were not reassuring despite the relative efficiency of the Army in suppressing the insurrection and the loyalty of active Army

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officers. The ease with which a small group of men (probably about 200) could seize and hold for 17 hours a provincial capital and, more importantly its airstrip, has called attention to the flimsy character of local defenses in outlying areas and the possibility that, had reinforcements for the rebels arrived opportunely in Salamá, the outcome might have been different. Even more significant is the circumstance that the people of Salamá made no effort to defend the duly constituted authorities and apparently showed considerable complacency towards the insurgents. Three members of the Partido de la Revolución Guatemalteca (PRG), the pro-Government party dominant in Baja Verapaz, lost their lives in an attempt to organize resistance, but eye witnesses report that a holiday atmosphere prevailed throughout the town all the day the rebels were in control and that the traditional Palm Sunday processions were held as usual. This coupled with the fact that the townspeople were equally passive when the Government forces reoccupied Salamá underscores the indifference of most Guatemalans to political developments which do not immediately affect them personally; this is particularly true in areas like Baja Verapaz where the population is predominantly Indian. In these circumstances, the organized initiative of a small, determined group can be decisive in shaping events.

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